

# Research Spotlight

## Project Information

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## Improving mobility and transportation options for Michigan's rural seniors

MDOT is committed to improving mobility and safety for older adults in Michigan, as demonstrated in a comprehensive series of planned and completed research studies. The first project in the series surveyed older adults and their caregivers statewide. This report summarizes the second project, which examined and made recommendations for meeting the unique transportation needs and challenges of seniors who live in rural areas of the state.

### Problem

Mobility challenges faced by older adults in rural Michigan include long travel distances to obtain basic services or medical care, and the limited availability of public, private or volunteer transportation providers. Because of these challenges, adults in rural areas often continue to drive at an older age than suburban or urban residents, even though they typically take longer trips, often on remote, unlit, or unpaved roads.

MDOT saw a clear need to better understand the specific barriers to improved mobility among older rural residents and formulate strategies to overcome those barriers.

### Approach

Researchers focused on six rural counties in Michigan with significant populations of older adults: Iron, Marquette, Hillsdale,



Mason, Huron and Alpena. The counties were selected for their varied locations across the state as well as their diverse alternative transportation options available to non-drivers.

To help establish the full scope of the mobility issues faced by rural adults, researchers developed a multifaceted approach to analyze existing data and

*“This research helped confirm much of what we previously learned about senior mobility and provided new recommendations specifically targeted to rural populations.”*

**Kimberly Lariviere, P.E.**  
Project Manager

collect new information from a range of stakeholders.

## Research

Following a review of literature on this topic, researchers conducted a detailed demographic analysis of Michigan with an emphasis on the six highlighted rural counties. The analysis not only confirmed that populations in these counties skewed significantly older than in Michigan as a whole, but projections through 2040 showed increasing numbers and percentages of older adults in five of the six counties.

Researchers next reached out to different stakeholder groups in the six counties using a variety of collection instruments, including:

- Telephone surveys with 600 older residents, approximately 25 percent of whom were users of public or community transportation.
- Structured interviews with transportation providers.
- Group discussions with three American Indian tribes.

## Results

The telephone surveys helped investigators assess the transportation needs and preferences of residents age 70 and older. In addition to capturing respondents' demo-

graphic information and driving patterns, the survey evaluated seniors' awareness of transportation options, preferences, typical use and reasons for not using available transportation options.

Structured interviews with representatives of public and community transportation providers—county and regional bus lines, departments of human services and veterans affairs, senior center volunteer organizations and taxi companies—provided additional feedback. The interviewers learned the providers wanted to improve the way transportation services were marketed to seniors and also needed to better understand the funding options available to them.

Group discussions with the American Indian tribes helped open an important dialogue to assess current services available to tribal elders, as well as their specific transportation needs and challenges. As sovereign nations, these tribes face many of the same issues as the rest of Michigan but experience unique challenges in coordinating services with local, county and state governments.

The combined findings, in conjunction with lessons learned from MDOT's earlier project on senior mobility, helped form 16 specific recommendations for MDOT, other agencies and transportation providers to help improve mobility among older rural adults.

## Value

MDOT has already moved forward in implementing the highest priority research recommendations. A new research project, Older Driver Education and Safe Mobility Planning, will develop and distribute materials to help prepare older adults for their transition to non-driving. The study will assess the specific planning needs of rural adults and how best to communicate this information to them.

MDOT also is following another research recommendation to improve the

department's online listings of transportation providers. MDOT is building upon existing resources on its Web site to include private and volunteer transportation services.

The impact of this research has reached beyond MDOT. The Michigan State Police (MSP) is following a research recommendation that calls on law enforcement to better understand issues related to aging and driving. A specialist has begun updating MSP materials and further exploring the role law enforcement plays in maintaining safe driving among rural older adults. This cross-agency effort highlights the collective concern in Michigan for the mobility and well-being of the state's older residents.

## Research Administration

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**This final report is available  
online at**

[www.michigan.gov/documents/  
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